

Articles and Sermons :: Living as a city on a hill in Oman

Living as a city on a hill in Oman - posted by ArthurRosh (), on: 2014/6/25 13:45

Whether you are single, married, have a family or are retired, you might wonder how you could do anything meaningful in the Arab World. The fact is that all types of people are needed to reach all types of local people. There's great joy and peace in being where God wants you to be. This takes you through the challenges you will face. Don't play it safe, because safety comes from obeying and depending on God.

It's crucial how you spend your first weeks in an Arab country. You must decide who you will spend time with, who you will bond with. Solidifying relationships with local friends is the priority. You come here to be a light to Arabs. So, put on your shoes, pray and hit the streets in faith that God will provide the right people. It may feel difficult at first, but that is good reason to avoid other ex-pats and instead cast yourself upon God for fellowship and encouragement. Many people you meet want to know about you. There's an intrigue: Why are you here? What do you do? Why do you not have children (or more of them)?

The first step is simple: obey and come!

Secondly, get over your fears, because God is greater than all of them. Fear of Islam, fear of a strange culture, fear about human rights for women: These are labels that impede our ability to see people who have been made in the image of God. We have lived 20 years in the region and have never felt personally threatened. We even don't lock our house at night. I doubt that I could say or do that in our home country!

Work with the gifts you have. Not everyone is a natural at sharing their faith across cultures, or is prepared to spend most evenings out late socialising. You may have gifts in networking and resourcing others, so work out of your strengths. Above all, you need to be authentic and make connections with Arabs regardless of personal cost - that's why we are here, after all. Everything else is secondary.

A SINGLE WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

When I arrived here as a single woman, I wondered how effective I could be for Jesus. What a wonderful discovery awaited: Muslim girls are very easy to relate to. They have high moral aspirations, they want to know God, honour their parents, go to university and succeed.

How can someone not believe in God? they ask me. Actually, as a Christian, I find it much harder to relate to young girls in my home country. There are so many roles and opportunities here for a single woman. Local women are curious about my life and impressed by my desire to live pleasing to God. I have been in so many homes often until midnight, sharing about each other's lives.

The treatment I have received from Omanis has been mostly honourable. Being a woman teacher in a class of men has provided great opportunities to meet their families and especially their women. The men are pleased to encourage their wives to meet with me, to speak English, to socialise.

An Omani's sense of hospitality is limitless, but will seldom adhere to a schedule. People just drop by at all times. This works both ways, though: I make it my aim to visit at least one local friend every day, even briefly. Many of the women are essentially at home - either with children or because they can't find work - and come to depend on your friendship. If we are away for a week, they worry about us and have all sorts of questions upon our return. There's a genuine bonding that occurs.

A SINGLE MAN'S PERSPECTIVE

As a single man, I can easily connect with other single men aged 16-30; beyond that they are usually married and move in a different circle. As anywhere, different age groups face different issues. That's why we also need older couples to befriend their peers, because as a single man I may or may not ever earn the respect and trust from an older man.

While people of every age can succeed in ministry here, because of the language and social structure, it is an advantage

e to begin as young as possible. Being single is a huge advantage in language learning and building relationships that demand high flexibility.

A COUPLE'S PERSPECTIVE

It can actually be harder to make friends as a couple in Oman, because men and women move in different social circles. Linking with other families can take a long time. If a couple is prepared to separately build friendships along gender lines, it can work. Yet whether or not there are many regular opportunities to befriend people or even see spiritual breakthroughs, God has commanded us to come and live transparent lives, as a city on a hill.

Even though we are a couple, the segregated society means that the husband will socialise with men and the wife with other women. We've gone to weddings and been separated for six hours. Yet occasionally, we have been invited by another family to a park for a picnic, which was a significant upgrade in our status.

RESPECT AND FRIENDSHIP

It can be frustrating when daily life makes it hard to connect socially with local people – everyone has work and other obligations. It can take months to get together in our home for dinner. I met with one friend, Rahal*, at language school; he was studying French and I studied Arabic. He was clearly passionate about his Islamic faith, and he knew I was passionate about following Jesus. It wasn't confrontational at all, but done with respect for each other. There was plenty of common ground, since the Old Testament, Psalms and New Testament are considered holy books in the Quran. I spoke about those prophets mentioned in both the Bible and the Quran. This surprised him. I asked if he wanted to study the Bible together and he agreed. We now have to establish a weekly meeting time.

Of course I want many locals to discover Jesus, but I also want to make genuine friendships no matter what. It's far better for me to disciple him and have him witness to his friends and family.

My first surprise when coming to Oman was how hospitable and caring people are toward foreigners. I have been invited again and again into their homes and even on vacations. Interestingly, on vacations they can stay up all night (it's cooler) so as to attend the first daily prayer, usually after 4:00 – and then sleep until noon!

That said, they demand high loyalty to be accepted into a group. Usually, it's eight to 12 guys that meet every evening. Because of the daytime heat, spending social time with Arabs happens only after evening prayer. That's simple for single people but harder to do for couples. Over time, it's not hard to talk about bigger things and life issues, including God. Talking about God comes naturally.

They may have initial prejudices against what they have been told about Christians and the Bible, but a determined patience and respect will eventually build trust and open dialogue about faith. That's why we need to have lots of believers come to live their lives here, because an individual's circle will not stray much from the inner group. Omanis love to meet foreigners and claim them as friends, but there are untold thousands waiting to meet that kind of friend.

The very young population in the Arab World bodes well for the future of the Church. They are communicators via social media and they are keen to meet and discuss issues. That's why we need their peers to come and walk alongside them. There is no substitute for human hospitality.

When you come to this area, you're inspired by reports of things happening all the time. In reality, it can seem like months between clear evidences of God at work. But you don't come here for the thrills; you're here out of a sense of calling from God. Victory is being consistent in your character at work and having colleagues remark that you are different from other Westerners they know. We can choose to not focus on the differences in our worldviews and instead find much common ground. Ironically, that also makes us different in their eyes, but positively so.

An interesting surprise and great encouragement has been among other ex-pats from various countries who have come here solely for work. Even though they are believers, they never realised that their work and presence can and should be a ministry. God is opening their eyes to see where they are and why. It's exciting to encourage them to embrace the opportunity, to get out of their 'foreigner' bubble and befriend their Omani neighbours.

LEARNING THE HEART LANGUAGE OF THE LOCALS

It is possible to be effective in English, although sacrificing to learn Arabic speaks volumes to the locals. They will certainly and repeatedly ask why you would do so, which is an opportunity to esteem their beautiful language. Arab women speaking English (especially in rural areas) are fewer than men, so communicating in Arabic with them could be more critical. Regardless of the path you take, you have to accept that you will never become Arab and will always be different. But that does not mean you can't be highly effective.

If you have a pioneering nature, you're not likely to settle where things are established. I'm challenged to go where nothing has been done yet for the Gospel. Anything can happen here. I wanted new challenges such as learning an entirely different language and culture. For me, the Arabian Peninsula is the best place on Earth for that. First comes the willingness to go; after that God began showing me where.

A short-term outreach to North Africa opened my eyes and heart for the people, but still I was afraid and tried to resist being pulled to this area. God said, "We've already had this conversation many times. What more do you need but Me?" Learning Arabic was tougher than I first imagined. Interestingly, it increased the importance of finding a group of local friends to share my struggles with. I can go to them anytime and be welcomed as family, be completely honest about my life and be encouraged by them. God turned my apparent weaknesses into strengths as my inner circle of local friends respect my model of openness and need for them.

FRUITS OF HOLISTIC MINISTRY

If people come to the Arab World with a reasonable holistic understanding of church planting and community transformation – how they go hand in hand – things will develop naturally. If they think they can employ what works in the West, they shouldn't come.

You must not make an artificial division between your spiritual walk and your job. Don't depend on a job for a platform; rather, understand your gifting and how that can be released into the community in everything you do. Stop worrying about how to accomplish ministry and family and work; let your life witness be your work. When we finally understood this, we began to see much more "fruit" from our whole lives.

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